

## BOOK REVIEW

WILLIAM B. OBER: *Boswell's Clap and Other Essays*. Carbondale, Ill., ., Southern Illinois University Press, 1979. xiv + 291 pp. \$17.50.

IN a recent review of a biography of George Orwell, *The New York Times*' reviewer quoted Orwell as not wanting a biography because: "Whatever mattered in his life was revealed in his work." Dr. Ober may have shown that, in some cases, the author's life story and medical and psychic pathology can be even more interesting and rewarding than a man's life's work. Dr. Ober's book is subtitled "Medical Analyses of Literary Men's Afflictions." This leads to the inevitable contemporary question: Did not Literary Ladies have afflictions too (George Sand, e.g.)? All this does not mean that authors' lives are not suitable for mining in conjunction with an *in extenso* absorption of each one's works. What motivates this type of literary investigative work must be a healthy scholarly curiosity and the opportunity to do detective work in the published and unpublished debris of a career which may be neglected by contemporary taste.

Dr. Ober is both temperamentally, intellectually, and professionally qualified to have produced this stimulating and entertaining book. After all, he is a well known and scholarly pathologist who can now claim to add literary pathology to his repertory.

The life of the lead subject, James Boswell, who made the book's engaging title possible, is revealed as one long downhill debauch from young manhood to the time of his death from renal failure and urinary tract obstruction secondary to urethral strictures. All this has been scrupulously assembled and analyzed from scattered Boswell autobiographical writings. There is a strange and haunting parallel between a contemporary addict lying on a slab, dead of the infectious complications of his habit and Boswell's self-destructive death.

In Boswell the author analyzes the implications of the medical or psychiatric aspects of the litterateur's life and draws fresh conclusions from new evidence from a spectrum of well known (Swinburne and Lawrence) as well as lesser known (Shadwell and the Earl of Rochester) authors who are subject to the author's scrupulous anamnesis and subsequent autopsy.

In the case of Rochester, Dr. Ober builds an extensive case for *ejaculatio praecox* from Rochester's published admission of a single such experience in a somewhat scabrous poem. After all, who never had an *ejaculatio praecox*?

The final chapter asks whether Socrates died of hemlock poisoning. This is sufficiently different from the preceding chapters as to appear anticlimactic. Yet this chapter, like all others, shows Dr. Ober's profound study and superb writing flair, which result in an entertaining and excellent work. These expeditions into the realm of literary medicine are perfectly suited to the ordinarily curious clinician. This reviewer predicts that this collection will also be a must for the nonmedical student seeking insights into authors about whom a thesis is being prepared or for sheer enjoyment in a cosy chair on a (preferably) rainy evening.

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